Grey Point Fort

A short guide to the fort complex
An officer manning a .303 Lewis gun on an anti-aircraft mounting
This restored coastal artillery site, believed to be the best preserved example of its kind in the UK, was originally built in 1904. It played a major role in the defence of Belfast Lough during World War 2, when it was the Operations Headquarters for all Northern Ireland coastal defences.

Your first views of the fort will probably be of the impressive perimeter walls and perhaps the pair of 23 feet long, six-inch bore guns pointing out over the lough. It is worth exploring further – inside the walls are the restored remains of a coastal defence fort and a fascinating collection of military memorabilia.

Since the coastal artillery was disbanded in 1956 many species of plant and animal have been able to flourish in the undisturbed areas in and around the fort.
Access from Coastal Path
Grey Point Fort, Helen’s Bay
A Tour of the Fort

1. Quarters
2. Engine Room
3. Entrance to Fort
4. Gun Store
5. Battery
6. Magazine
7. Shelters
8. Battery Observation Post
9. Fire Command Post
10. Radar Platform
11. Searchlight Emplacement 1936
12. Searchlight Emplacement 1940
13. Searchlight Emplacement 1936

Access from Coastal Path
1 **Quarters**

These housed the Master Gunner or the permanent staff responsible for the maintenance of the armament and were built at the same time as the original battery. This also served as a guard house.

![The Quarters](image1)

2 **Engine House**

This housed a Crossley generator to power the searchlights and internal lighting.

3 **Entrance Gates**

The gates were the only entrance into the fort. The tall iron fence surmounting the walls was known as the unclimbable fence by the garrison.

4 **Gun Store**

The store was used to house a variety of guns. These included machine guns; two 4.5 inch howitzers – for defence against shore based attack during the Second World War and latterly two 25-pounder saluting guns.

![The two Mark VII guns in the emplacements](image2)

5 **Battery, Magazine, Shelters**

6 The battery was armed with two Mark VII 6-inch breech loaded guns, housed in emplacements 100 feet apart and with angled reinforced concrete glacis sloping to seaward. Originally the guns were “en barbette”, that is firing over the top of the parapet, but gun houses were added in 1940 to give protection against air attack. On the parapet and under each gun platform is a series of cartridge and shell recesses which held the immediate supply of ammunition. The reserve was kept below ground in the Magazine (6) and transferred to the gun floor in a manually operated lift. Below ground are the Shelters (7) where crews on duty were quartered ready for action.

![The two Mark VII guns in the emplacements](image2)
**Battery Observation Post**

The Battery Observation Post was the tactical headquarters of the Battery Commander. From here, he had a clear view of his guns and their field of fire, and could pass orders to both the guns and searchlights.

**Fire Command Post**

The Fire Command Post was the tactical headquarters of the Fire Commander, who had operational command of the batteries at Grey Point, Kilroot, Orlock, Larne and Magilligan.

**Radar Platform**

The Radar Platform was built in 1953 and Anti-Aircraft Radar No 3, Mark II was installed in 1954, only to be removed two years later when the fort was closed.

**Searchlight Emplacements**

The Searchlight Emplacements are located in front of the guns. Numbers 11 and 13 were built in 1936 and number 12 in 1940. They were added when the view from the old station became obscured by newly constructed overhead shields on the gun emplacement to provide protection against aircraft attack.

Part of the defensive trench system which once surrounded the searchlights can still be seen as you approach the eastern emplacement.
Grey Point Fort was built between 1904 and 1907 on land bought from the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava for £8400. Two six-inch breech loaded guns were mounted and tested during May 1907. During the First World War, the Fort was manned by the Antrim Royal Garrison Artillery (Special Reserve) and after 1937 by 188 Antrim Coastal Battery. Between the First and Second World Wars, two searchlight emplacements were built and several other modifications carried out within the fort.

During the Second World War, as in the First, the role of Grey Point Fort was to protect Belfast Lough from naval attack. When a ship entered the Lough it was contacted by the coastal defence to make itself known. If there was no response the ship would be signalled to “Heave to or be sunk”. If the ship maintained its course or again failed to reply, a plugged round would have been fired across its bows. If there was still no response the next round to be fired would have been a high explosive shell.

During the War target practice was carried out by the gunners twice a week. A tug from the Clyde towed a barge a mile behind with a chequered target. Local residents were warned to open their windows and doors to prevent blast damage. Reports from those stationed at the fort suggest that the target was usually missed!

The on-duty Watch were quartered in the gun floor shelter in the rear of each gun. When they weren’t practising drills, the gun crews on duty stayed in the underground shelters to the right and left of the guns, ready to spring into action at a moments notice.
During the Second World War, thousands of recruits trained at Grey Point Fort before being dispatched to the conflict. Before making their way to Grey Point Fort, these members of the Royal Artillery enjoyed a welcome treat of tea and pork pies on arrival in Belfast.
Grey Point Fort

The Guns

The fort was armed with two Mark VII six-inch bore guns, built by Vickers Sons and Maxim, and each bolted to a carriage embedded in a concrete emplacement.

The Gun Emplacement

The barrel of the gun was 23ft 3ins long and weighed 7 tons. It consisted of overlapping tubes of compressed steel wire. The bore diameter was 6 ins and spiral grooves cut along the interior would have caused the shell to rotate as it was propelled along the barrel.

The guns were capable of firing forged or cast iron shells, weighing about 100 lbs, a distance of up to six miles. The front of the gun was protected by a semicircular steel shield bolted to the front of the carriage.

Much practice firing took place during the war years, but the guns were fired in anger just two days after the declaration of war in September 1939. This was when the “E Hayward” from Liverpool entered Belfast Lough and failed to answer the recognition signal sent from the fort. A plugged round was then fired across her bow. In a second incident the plug of the gun was accidently discharged. This ricocheted off the water and landed above Carrickfergus. It is said that a cow was killed and a cowshed demolished by the impact!

Each gun was operated by an officer and a crew of 10 men. There was a very precise and established drill for gun crews in action, detailing the composition and discipline of the detachment, ammunition supply, the position in action of each member of the crew, preparation of the gun, loading, sighting, laying and firing the gun.

Further details on the history of the fort can be found in *Twixt Bay and Burn* (ed.R. Masefield), published by the Bayburn Historical Society in 2011.

Diagram showing the loading of the gun

Cartridge packed with cordite

Shell ‘rammed home’
Reconstruction of the Number 1 Gun with the sloping glacis
Grey Point Fort & Coastal Defence

The oldest surviving examples of dedicated coastal defences around the Irish shoreline are the Martello Towers, built during the early 1800s under the threat of French invasion during the Napoleonic wars. The only example in Northern Ireland, at Magilligan Point on Lough Foyle, is also in the care of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and is well worth visiting.

Grey Point Fort was part of a later network of forts, built during the early 20th century to defend the coast of Ireland. In particular, Belfast and its approaches needed to be defended from naval attack as the City was home to a huge shipbuilding industry. Belfast also had a thriving port with large quantities of raw materials and finished goods passing through the docks every day.

Historically, Carrickfergus Castle was the principal focus of coastal defence for the lough. Following a review in the early 1900s, it was decided that new, more modern coastal defences were required and two batteries were built.

One was at Kilroot on the north shore of Belfast Lough and the other was here at Grey Point, Helen’s Bay. Apart from defence, the other function of the forts was operating an examination service which identified ships entering Belfast Lough.

Grey Point and Kilroot were of similar design and were garrisoned during both world wars. They continued to be manned by the Territorial Army until the disbandment of the coastal artillery in 1956.
The Care of Grey Point Fort and the Collections

The Grey Point area has been managed by the Department of the Environment for the benefit of the general public since 1971. The fort itself was restored and officially opened to the public in 1987 as an historic site within Crawfordsburn Country Park and as a feature of the North Down Coastal Path. In 2010 the fort was formally recognised as an Historic Monument in State Care.

Although the fort buildings remained in good condition following closure in 1956, much of the military equipment was removed. The Grey Point Fort Committee were, however, successful in locating two original six-inch guns of the type that were used at the fort.

The first was transferred from Spike Island, Co. Cork and its installation at Grey Point was formally opened by the Master Gunner, St James Park, General Sir Martin Farndale KCB on 3rd April 1993. The second gun was installed in 1999 and formally opened by Mr Robert Hanna, chairman of the Department of the Environment’s Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside.

Within the fort there is a unique display of military and other radio equipment and an extensive collection of other military memorabilia from across the 20th century.

Lancaster bomber’s wireless equipment

These are housed in the Fire Command Post (9) and the Magazine (6) respectively. Note too the Dig For Victory Garden restored by the Friends of Grey Point Fort.

25-pounder guns can be seen at the fort
Wildlife and Nature at Grey Point Fort

**Birds**

Inside the fort you will see blue, great and coal tits, chaffinches, robins, bullfinches and if you look carefully treecreepers spiralling up the larger tree trunks.

Seabirds can be seen all year round. There are many types of gulls and you will also see shag and cormorants flying past or feeding offshore. Smaller coastal birds like turnstones, redshank, oystercatchers and purple sandpipers can be seen along the shore-line.

Winter is a good time to look out for coastal birds. The beautifully coloured eider duck is regularly seen in large numbers and black guillemots diving down under water to swim after fish. In winter, black guillemots are a paler colour but retain the white patch on the wing.

In the summer terns can be seen hovering for a moment before plunging headlong for small fish. The common tern is the most familiar with an orange-red bill with a black tip. You may be lucky and see an arctic tern which has a blood red bill with no red tip or sandwich tern which has a black bill with a yellow tip – it's worth looking very carefully!

**Flowers**

Grey Point is a great spot for finding wild flowers. These flowers are typically woodland species, for example, bluebells, lesser celandine and primrose. Along the coastal path you will find coastal plants, for example, thrift, sea campion, scentless mayweed and also some interesting heath species, bell heather and ling.
In Spring look out for primroses and lesser celandine often blooming from January or early February and in May you can see the bluebells in the wooded areas on the Point.

Many plants have adapted to life near the sea. Stonecrops are succulents and are able to survive the drought conditions of ‘life on a rock’. Thrift and sea plantain are both tolerant of salt spray and so can withstand the harsh conditions of the shore.

**Insects**

Of all the insects to be found in Crawfordsburn Country Park, the most interesting and beautiful are the butterflies. On a calm, warm summer’s day you will see ringlets, meadow browns, small tortoiseshell and the common blue butterfly.

Red admiral butterflies are more likely to be seen in late summer. This species migrates from the Mediterranean to the UK each year. The adults mate and lay their eggs on nettles which the young caterpillars feed on before their metamorphosis into adult butterflies.

It is these adult red admirals that are usually seen in late summer feeding on nectar-rich plants or on over-ripe fruit including blackberries, which are common along the coastal path.

Summer is also the time to look out for hoverflies. These, often colourful flies hover in mid air and some of the brighter-coloured varieties are mimics of wasps or bumblebees. This helps them to evade predation but none of them sting! Insects are the most numerous organisms on the earth and are everywhere. It’s worth looking for the different types: moths, beetles, flies – see how many you can find.
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